

Running head: PERCEIVED JUSTIFICATION OF ANGER

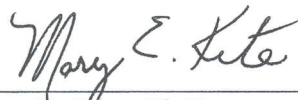
An Empirical Note on Anger: Gender Differences

in Perceived Justification

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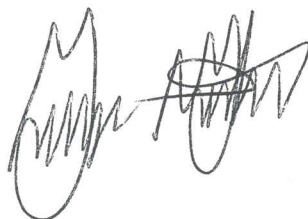
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## Abstract

Philosopher Marilyn Frye (1983) categorizes anger, a stereotypically male emotion, as a tool to declare one's own agency. This creates a problem when looking at the perceived justification, or uptake, of anger as it pertains to women. Frye hypothesizes that women's anger is generally not well received and therefore, women are marginalized and denied agency. Using a mixed model factorial design, participants' perceptions of anger were examined in three scenarios that varied by whether they were male-stereotypic, female-stereotypic, or not gender associated. Participants reported whether they believed the target's angry response was justified or was an overreaction. They also rated how likeable they found the target to be. Results showed a significant main effect for scenario on all three dependent measures, but ratings did not differ by target gender and the interaction between target gender and scenario was not significant. More research is needed to determine whether Frye's claims can be empirically supported.

### An Empirical Note on Anger: Gender Differences in Perceived Justification

In Marilyn Frye's philosophical work, "A Note on Anger" (1983), she makes four claims that will be addressed in the current study. These claims are empirical in nature and address how the world is, not how the world should be. In philosophy, this is where her argument ends but, in psychology, this is where work begins. To start, it is important to develop a summary of her claims as well as an understanding of why these claims should be tested.

To Frye (1983), anger is a tool through which an individual can claim their domain or personhood to another person. This is done by an expression of anger in specific circumstances where an individual personally feels as though he or she is not being viewed as a person with rights. Anger is seen as a reaction to being wronged. By getting angry that person is claiming that they are in fact a person and deserve the same respect and rights of all other persons.

Simply claiming that they are a person and so deserve rights does nothing to develop a person's agency unless others view this action as meaningful. This acceptance of a person's anger as being meaningful is referred to as uptake. By giving a person uptake individuals are looking at why they are angry and make strides toward understanding and correcting any appropriate claim of anger. Frye claims that women's anger is generally not well received. As Frye (1983) notes, "[a]ttention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and to the topic of our mental stability (p, 84)."

The notion of uptake is similar to that of testimony in epistemology. In philosophy, testimony is one of the few ways in which knowledge can be acquired. If a person has knowledge, that person can then share that knowledge through communication. It is up to the receiver to decide if the testimony they have been given is justified. This comes down to whether the source of the testimony is a reliable or credible source. If the source is considered a credible

source and the testimony fits current constructs of knowledge then the testimony is accepted as knowledge and justified. If the source testimony is considered a not credible source, then the information is dismissed as unjustified (Audi, 2009). Unjustified testimony is unintelligible and therefore not knowledge.

According to Frye (1983), anger is the tool through which the knowledge of agency, or the knowledge of personhood, is transmitted. If information about one's own agency is viewed to have come from a not credible source then the testimony fails to transmit knowledge. That is why a women's anger is viewed as unjustified and therefore unintelligible.

Frye does not want to state that women's anger is always unintelligible. She expands her claim that women's anger is generally not well received into stereotypically gendered contexts. Her second claim is that women can get angry in stereotypically female roles such as caring, child rearing, housekeeping, and secretarial work. Third, women can seldom get angry in stereotypically male roles such as working on cars. Finally, Frye believes that women can never get angry in the bedroom.

Thomas (2003) used interviews to find gender-related themes within anger. In these interviews, she showed that men and women often find discussing events in which they have become angry to be uncomfortable and that doing so creates undesirable conflict. Women and men often reported both guilt and self-reproach towards events when they have gotten angry. Hence, women and men held similar views about whether and how one's own anger should be limited.

What differs by gender are the relationships women and men have to those who are the targets of their anger (Thomas, 2003). Women's anger was limited to events pertaining to those closest to them, such as a significant others, whereas strangers more often provoked men's anger.



Also, men more often reported having objects as a focus of their anger, such as guns, cars, and tools. Women did not report using such objects, but focused more on situations that pertained to their powerlessness (Thomas, Smucker, & Droppleman, 1998).

Psychological research shows that anger and pride are stereotypically viewed as male emotions, whereas most other emotions, such as happiness and sadness, are stereotypically associated with women (Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000). These stereotypical beliefs lend support to the view that men's anger is more justified than women's anger.

Moreover, anger is more quickly recognized in a man's face than in that of a woman's face, while the opposite is found for happiness. This suggests that people's stereotypical beliefs about emotions may stem from how they interpret facial cues related to the sexual dimorphism of the face itself (Vaughn, Kenrick, Neuber, Blackwell, & Smity, 2007). Furthermore, Plant et al. (2000) examined perceptions of pictures of infants. Participants watched a video of a single infant and denoted the emotion the infant was expressing. The same video was used throughout the study, but the participants were told that the infant was either a boy or a girl. In addition, participants were categorized as high and low stereotyped using average difference scores on the Personal Beliefs Questionnaire. Male participants who were rated as highly stereotyped rated the infant labeled boy as significantly more angry than the infant labeled girl. The ratings for men who scored low on the stereotype belief measure and all women, regardless of their score on the belief measure, rated the male and female infant similarly.

Overreaction involving anger has been shown to have an effect on perceived justification of men's and women's anger. For example, Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly (2002) presented two sets of overreaction scenarios to respondents. These scenarios only differed in the target sex of the main character in the scenario. Results showed that overreaction scenarios involving men in

interpersonal contexts were rated as less appropriate than the same scenarios involving women. Women's anger was considered to be unintelligible through its excessive overreaction, and therefore it was considered to be more appropriate than that of a man's overreaction. This was not the case in scenarios involving achievement. Men's overreaction in scenarios involving achievement was rated as significantly more appropriate than that of women's anger. Again, this supports the hypothesis that perception of anger is contingent on contextual gender stereotypical events.

Previous psychological research supports the claims that Marilyn Frye makes in her philosophical work. Specifically, anger is stereotypically associated with men rather than women and people more readily recognize men's angry facial expressions. Hence, I expect that participants will find men's anger to be more justified and less of an overreaction than women's anger, particularly in male-associated contexts. Similarly, I expect that male actors who are expressing anger will be liked more than female actors displaying similar behavior.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N=141$ ) were a convenience sample drawn from Ball State University's Introduction Psychology Subject Pool. The study was open to all individuals who were over 18 years of age and spoke English as their first language. Participants also had to be able to manipulate a computer keyboard and mouse. Within this convenience sample, 34.8% identified as male and 65.2% identified as female. Mean participant age was 19.82 years ( $SD = 3.79$ ). Self-reported ethnicity was as follows: 87.9% Caucasian, 6.4% African American, 2.8% Hispanic, 0% Asian, and 2.8% other.

### Materials

A series of three vignettes were created to represent anger in specific situations (see Appendix A). Each vignette contained a different theme defined as stereotypically male, stereotypically female, or not gender-associated. For example, in Scenario One, the target was described as getting angry with a coach, Scenario Two, the target, a secretary, was described as getting angry with her/his boss, and Scenario Three, the target is described as being angry with a car mechanic. There were two versions of each scenario, one with a male actor and one with a female actor. Participants rated how justified they believed the target's anger was using 5-point rating scales ranging from 1 *strongly justified* to 5 *not at all justified*. Also, participants rated how likely it was that the target was overreacting using 5-point rating scales ranging from 1 *strongly overreacting* to 5 *not at all overreacting*. Finally, participants rated how likeable they believed the target was using 5-point rating scales ranging from 1 *very unlikable* to 5 *very likeable*. To conclude participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

### Procedure

Participants signed up for and completed the Ball State University's online Introductory Psychology subject pool system. Participants were viewed as giving consent by submitting a separate online consent form. Responses were anonymous and participants were given unlimited time to read each vignette and answered the presented questions. The vignettes were presented in the same order for each participant: general, female stereotyped, and then male stereotyped. Data was collected in two phases. Participants in the first phase received vignettes alternating the gender of the main character from female, to male, and back female. Participants in the second phase received vignettes alternating from male, to female, and back to male.

## Results

A 2 (Participant Gender: Men vs. Women) x 2 (Target Sex: Men vs. Women) X 3 (Scenario: General vs. Work vs. Car) mixed factor multivariate analysis was used to examine participants' responses. Participant gender and target sex were between subjects factors and scenario was a within subjects factor. For all dependent variables, results showed only a main effect for scenario (see Table 1). Participants rated anger as more justified in the car scenario than in the general and work scenario respectively,  $F(2, 135) = 22.85, p < .001$ . Participants rated anger as more of an overreaction in the work scenario than in the car and general scenario respectively,  $F(2, 136) = 19.41, p < .001$ . Participants rated the target as more likeable in the general scenario than in the car and work scenario respectively,  $F(2, 134) = 28.88, p < .001$ . There was no main effect for target sex, nor was the interaction between target sex and scenario significant ( $F_s < .84$ ).

## Discussion

According to Frye's (1983) philosophical work, gender is hypothesized to have an interaction effect with context of stereotyped scenarios. That is, men's anger is seen as more justified than women's anger, especially in male stereotyped contexts, such as working with cars. Furthermore, gender is to have a general overall effect on the uptake of anger, with men's anger being more justified and intelligible than that of women's anger. This study set out to test these ideas empirically using scenarios that varied by context and target sex. Although results showed that anger was viewed differently across the three scenarios, the hypothesis that perceptions would also vary by target sex was not supported.



These results are surprising because anger is viewed as an emotion associated with men and not women as found in Plant, et al. (2000). This, along with Hutson-Comeaux and Kelly's (2002) findings that gender differences in overreaction between that of women's and men's anger, suggests that perceived justification of anger should differ between women and men. However, in those studies, context was not a major factor whereas in the current study, anger was always described within a social context. When contextual information is available, people use this information to make judgments about others and this can override the influence of stereotypic beliefs (Deaux & Major, 1987; Eagly, 1987).

Another possibility is that, although past research supports the hypothesis that gender differences exist between uptake of anger, the current study lacks the statistical power to detect this difference. Power is the probability that the statistical analysis will find a difference, or will not produce a false negative or Type II error. If effects due to target sex were small, it is possible that, a larger sample was needed to detect this difference (Cohen, 1977).

It is important to focus on the measures employed when considering why the current study did not find the hypothesized gender differences in justification for anger. Although vignettes are commonly used in psychological research and are a useful tool in assessing perceptions of others, it is possible that the particular vignettes used in the current study were not engaging or that participants did not focus on target gender. If so, the vignettes would not evoke people's true reaction to how women and men are expected to behave in emotionally charged situations. That is, vignettes must appear real to the participants for them to respond in a realistic way (Neff, 1979). Furthermore, the current study relied on the survey data from college undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course. The age range was very limited due to the availability of research participants. Though general consensus is that college

undergraduates are produce accurate data and generalizable findings, some limitations still exist within the sample (Sears, 1986). First, college undergraduates are normally less fixed with their personal lives and personal beliefs than in later life. Also, those students who have been accepted into an undergraduate program must have adept cognitive skills and a disposition to compliance with authority. These students may lack the ability to place themselves within the situations presented in as much as they may have never experienced such situations.

#### *Future Research*

More research is needed to determine whether Frye's (1983) claims can be empirically supported. To work through the limitations of the current study it is necessary improve the current vignettes. To accurately assess reactions to women's and men's anger it might be important to place the participant into an emotionally charged situation, perhaps through the use of video vignettes. Video vignettes have been found to work in a similar fashion to written vignettes while allowing individual to experience the scenario first hand (Cohen & Staryer, 1996). The use of video can help to develop a great understanding of the overall situation and allow individuals to directly view the anger being displayed. Furthermore, the future research should use a randomized presentation of the video vignettes, which was not implemented, in order to reduce the chance of order effects. Finally, to avoid the limitations of only using undergraduate students, future research should include a community sample.

#### *Conclusion*

Overall the failure to find gender differences within the current study seems to be a caused by the power of the contextual information, which may have overshadowed perceived gender of target differences. If people do view men's and women's anger differently, it would support Frye's claims that women will have difficulty obtaining uptake of their anger. Without

the ability to testify through one's own anger, women will not have the ability to testify that they have been wronged, thus denied their agency, or personhood. Without the ability to declare such agency women are marginalized. If in fact there is no difference between uptake of anger and gender, then women can declare their agency retaining their personhood. Again, more research is needed to determine whether Frye's claims can be empirically supported.

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of in Justification, Liability, and Overreaction by Vignette

	General	Work	Car
<b>Female:</b>			
Justification	M = 2.65 SD = 1.02 (n = 92)	M = 1.98 SD = 1.05 (n = 92)	M = 2.92 SD = 1.26 (n = 92)
Likable	M = 3.18 SD = .89 (n = 90)	M = 2.31 SD = .94 (n = 90)	M = 2.96 SD = 1.09 (n = 90)
Overreaction	M = 2.49 SD = 1.19 (n = 91)	M = 3.48 SD = 1.24 (n = 91)	M = 2.73 SD = 1.26 (n = 91)
<b>Male:</b>			
Justification	M = 2.76 SD = 1.25 (n = 49)	M = 2.12 SD = 1.24 (n = 49)	M = 2.88 SD = 1.30 (n = 49)
Likable	M = 3.20 SD = 1.08 (n = 49)	M = 2.29 SD = 1.00 (n = 49)	M = 3.04 SD = 1.02 (n = 49)
Overreaction	M = 2.43 SD = 1.23 (n = 49)	M = 3.49 SD = 1.31 (n = 49)	M = 2.82 SD = 1.40 (n = 49)
<b>Total:</b>			
Justification	M = 2.69 SD = 1.10 (n = 141)	M = 2.03 SD = 1.11 (n = 141)	M = 2.91 SD = 1.27 (n = 141)
Likable	M = 3.10 SD = .96 (n = 139)	M = 2.30 SD = .96 (n = 139)	M = 2.99 SD = 1.06 (n = 139)
Overreaction	M = 2.47 SD = 1.20 (n = 140)	M = 3.49 SD = 1.26 (n = 140)	M = 2.76 SD = 1.30 (n = 140)

\*All main effects for situation were significant at  $p < .001$

## Appendix A

At the start of the soccer game (Sally/Roger) noticed that (her/his) son Johnny was not on the field but sitting on the bench. As the time counted down in the first half Johnny remained on the bench while the other children were allowed to play in the game. At half time (Sally/Roger) confronted the coach of the Cougars to see why Johnny was not allowed to participated. Coach Riggin expressed, "I would be willing to play Johnny if he was any good." (Sally/Roger) was upset and began to yell at Coach Riggin saying, "I cannot believe that you would have the nerve to tell me that my child should not be playing on your stupid little peewee soccer team. He has not had the opportunity to show how good he can be. If you do not play him in the second half, you can take your little team and stuff it." Coach Riggin, taken back by the outburst, informed (Sally/Roger) that parents do not determine who gets to play. (Sally/Roger) removed Johnny explaining how (her/his) did not want him to play for a man as mean as Coach Riggin, and how they would find him a better soccer team to play on.

1. How justified is (Sally/Roger) in her reaction?
2. How likely is it that (Sally/Roger) overreacting?
3. How likeable is (Sally/Roger)?

Mr. Youngblood, head of marketing, stormed out of his office and grabbed the large stack of papers that (Jason/Kelly) his secretary, had just received from the copier, and proceeded to throw them onto the floor. Mr. Youngblood stammered, "Astrotech decided to sign with that dumb company." (Jason/Kelly) knew that all the work (she/he) had placed into finishing the proposal was a waste. As (she/he) looked at what Mr. Youngblood was now doing to (her/his) finished presentation a fit of anger came over (Jason/Kelly). (She/He) stood up in the middle of the room and yelled directly at Mr. Youngblood, "Stop destroying my hard work." (Jason/Kelly)

continued, "I have worked my butt off for nearly six months trying to make this trip proposal for you. I understand that losing the client to another firm is horrible but you must respect this stuff." Mr. Youngblood simply looked at (Jason/Kelly) and said, "You can get your stuff and get out of here." (Jason/Kelly) looked Mr. Youngblood right in the eyes and simply stated, "You don't deserve to fire me, I quit," and quickly left the firm.

4. How justified is (Jason/Kelly) in her reaction?

5. How likely is it that (Jason/Kelly) overreacting?

6. How likeable is (Jason/Kelly)?

(Alex/Cara) was running low on time and knew that (she/he) need to get her oil changed so (she/he) pulled into Dave's Auto. Normally, (Alex/Cara) would have done it (herself/himself) since (she/he) had grown up working on cars with (her/his) father. (Alex/Cara) informed Dave, the mechanic, that (she/he) needed (her/his) oil changed, and would be back later that day. After running some more errands (Alex/Cara) returned to Dave's shop to pick up (her/his) car. When (she/he) got there Dave informed (her/him) that he recalibrated (her/his) carburetor feeling it was incorrectly calibrated. (Alex/Cara) knew that her carburetor was fine because (she/he) had given the engine a checkup last month. (she/he) had even taken time to double check that the carburetor was mixing the appropriate amount of air and gas for the best gas mileage.

(Alex/Cara) was seeing red. Frustrated, (Alex/Cara) stated that (she/he) was not going to pay for the recalibration. (she/he) was mad that he had taken it upon himself to fiddle with (her/his) precise fine-tuning. Dave snidely told (Alex/Cara) that (she/he) couldn't have (her/his) car until he received his money. (Alex/Cara) forcefully, paid Dave the money then slapped him in the face. Dave stepping away from (Alex/Cara) threw (her/him) the keys to the car and told (her/him), "I never want to see you in here again."



7. How justified is (Alex/Cara) in her reaction?

8. How likely is it that (Alex/Cara) overreacting?

9. How likeable is (Alex/Cara)?

10. Age:

11. Gender:

A. Male

B. Female

12. Race:

A. Caucasian

B. African American

C. Asian

D. Hispanic

E. O